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Published in:
Studies in Conservation

DOI:
[10.1080/00393630.2016.1188250](https://doi.org/10.1080/00393630.2016.1188250)

Publication date:
2016

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
O'reilly, E., Miller, R., & Bodor, J. (2016). Curation, conservation, and the artist in Silent Explosion: Ivor Davies and Destruction in Art. *Studies in Conservation*, 61(sup2), 167-173.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00393630.2016.1188250>

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Curation, Conservation and the Artist in *Silent Explosion: Ivor Davies and Destruction in Art*

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Abstract

This paper examines the preservation and curatorial approaches explored for the exhibition '*Silent Explosion: Ivor Davies and Destruction in Art*' at Amgueddfa Cymru - National Museum Wales (November 2015-March 2016). The collaboration between the artist, curator/researcher and conservators will be considered, and the evolving and flexible way in which transient pieces were presented/re-presented described. The paper offers a case study in the context of this exhibition and argues that regardless of whether it is in traditional media (such as painting) or as time-based media or performance art (unstable, and open to interpretation), Davies' work challenges a perception of artworks as finished, single-authored objects.

Keywords: Destruction art; Post-war art; exhibition; museum case study; behaviour-based conservation

Introduction

Ivor Davies is a prominent figure in Wales as a painter and Welsh language activist but relatively few people know about his extreme performances between 1966-1968 that included explosives and connected him with the international avant-garde of the time through his involvement with the Destruction in Art Symposium, London, 1966.

Supported by an AHRC-funded doctoral research project between Aberystwyth University and Amgueddfa Cymru - National Museum Wales (AC-NMW) 'Silent Explosion: Ivor Davies and Destruction in Art' has been co-curated by Judit Bodor and the AC-NMW and developed in collaboration with the artist. This exhibition concept grew out of a desire to avoid existing art historical narratives and make connections between artworks through Davies' lifelong interest in the relationship between creation, destruction, and the transformation of materials. Artworks are thus presented as inter-connected 'repertoire' of actions, objects and motifs across media reflecting an evolving world of continuous acts of recycling, revisions and additions.

This paper looks at how the behaviour, inherent logic and materiality of artworks, combined with the context of the museum and the changing intentions of a living artist, can affect the methods of presentation and preservation through which viewers encounter and understand artworks. We will first describe our initial encounters with selected artworks from the 1950s and 1960s, looking first at three painted works, followed by a multimedia performance. We will discuss our approach to finding appropriate ways to treat and exhibit them within a retrospective that addresses the artist's interest in destruction in art. Finally we will reflect on our experience and findings to offer an example for 'saving the now'.

The Challenges

The first challenge of the exhibition was to consider how to work within a research project that involved an independent curator/researcher, a living artist and – with very few exceptions – artworks that are not in collections but in the possession of the artist. In this context, strategies of presentation and preservation were not only directed by

the museum's institutional approach but needed to address the various agendas of the artist and the research. This complex process resulted in somewhat compromised decisions that might even lead to the question of whether the preservation of intentionally auto-destructive art is itself an oxymoron.

Given Davies' interest in obsolescence and destruction as material transforms, the precarious nature of materiality and thus the artworks' relationship to time was another issue to consider. Davies' works feature organic material as inbuilt elements of decay (for example soil or eggshells) or are left deliberately by the artist under conditions (damp or dusty environments) to enforce aging and deterioration. His multimedia performances - often considered to have disappeared – in fact involve what might be described as a 'multiplicity of materiality' (Lillemose 2006), which can be exhibited and which includes material remains (such as relics and documentation), actions, technological processes as well as later interpretations.

From our perspectives as curator/researcher and conservators a third challenge was how/whether to protect the relevant artworks as objects (in the case of the performance its documentary remains) and stabilise them for the duration of the exhibition, or develop strategies that protect the essence or spirit of these artworks that we defined as destruction, transformation and movement and which should thus define the experience of the viewer. In terms of Davies' paintings questions arose from the artist's changing intention between the artworks' conception in the 1950s and their exhibition in 2015. In the case of the multimedia performance 'Adam on St Agnes' Eve' the questions related more to the fact that the work is now only

accessible as an archive, raising the dilemma of whether exhibiting this archive would neutralise the effect of these events as something to be experienced.

Our final challenge was the moving of objects from Davies' studio to the context of the Museum. AC-NMW curator Nick Thornton (2015, 55) describes the artist's studio as an 'immersive environment' that 'holds works and objects, at times paradoxically, in states of stasis and creative flux' - bringing them into the Museum and out of the decaying studio many of the works were frozen in time, suspended from their decay for the duration of the exhibition.

Indeed the concept of the exhibition as a whole seemed at odds with the concept of destructive art. If the exhibition temporarily stabilises otherwise transforming artworks, how does it interfere with their future life and understanding? Does the moving of artworks from the uncontrolled environment of the studio to the environmentally controlled gallery result in a different type of destruction? Although not necessarily visible, the continuation of deterioration that would have occurred, had the objects remained in the studio, are suspended in the event of an exhibition and in some way their course is moved in a different direction.

The Exhibition

Objects/Paintings

Approaching paintings that had been stored in the artist's studio for decades, we questioned the level at which dust and damage might be interpreted by the audience as artistic concept or as a sign of neglect. This was largely addressed by a decision to dust frames and not the paintings. The following three artworks illustrate more

involved decision-making prompted by the unique situation of the 2015 exhibition. 'Red Feeling' (c.1959-61), was formed by pressing plaster through coarse hessian glued onto the face of wooden strainers. When examined on the floor of the studio it had a layer of surface dirt and what was suspected to be fatty acid efflorescence sitting on the uppermost surfaces of the textured paint. 'Yellow Shadow' (1965) is a curved metal sheet attached to a chipboard support, covered in scrim and painted white with a yellow internal surface. It had been stored flat in the studio and had substantial surface dirt as well as mildew spots and scattered scuff marks. 'Falling' (c.1956-57) is an oil painting with passages of adhered broken eggshells that were found to be flaking from the surface, with associated raised and cupped flakes of glue and paint. This painting also had extensive surface dirt.

A paintings conservation approach would have focused on the improvement of visual clarity through cleaning and stabilisation the physical object. On all three artworks this would have involved the removal of later surface accretions where safely possible, and the consolidation and potential returning to plane of the raised flakes on 'Falling'. In 'Red Feeling' the whitened dust, dirt and efflorescence have created a new shape in the composition, following a slight convex bulge. This visual interruption of the 'original' (1950s) surface would have given further impetus to remove the dirt and efflorescence.

During discussions with the artist however, it became clear that the dust, later accretions and crumbling are integral to the works, as evidence of material transformation through time. Stepping sideways and treating the works according to their intended behaviour rather than material condition, different decisions were

made. We understood the essence of 'Red Feeling' to involve a concern with material decay. The dust and efflorescence was left in place, contributing to the debris that was already part of the rich surface patina. Contrasting to this, the behaviour of 'Yellow Shadow' involved the optical reflection of the yellow internal surface on the painted white board, therefore the surface dirt and scuffs were removed.

'Falling' presented a more nuanced case, with three apparent choices. It could be left to decay thus aligning with the perceived essence of the work. This presented a challenge to the ethics of conservation as the painting was being taken from its relatively safe studio storage (with time as the agent of decay), to an exhibition, involving risks to a physically unstable work associated with transport and hanging. A second option was for the artist to re-adhere the eggshell himself (the paintings conservators preferred option). Davies has a history of restoring his own works involving filling and retouching discrete losses and adding structural supports when necessary. He proposed using egg (shaken with oil to plasticise) brushed on with a long-hair brush and left for half a day before being blotted to remove excess oil and prevent wrinkling. This would have maintained the artist's practice of making revisions and additions. The last option was that the work could be consolidated by the conservator with the aim to stabilise physically but not affect the work visually. The choice of the latter was made by the artist, who, as owner of the works, ultimately held the decision. We consolidated the crumbling eggshell with BEVA 371, chosen for its matt finish that allowed stabilisation without visual alteration to the crumbling surface effect.

Performance

Davies' historical multimedia performance artwork 'Adam on St Agnes' Eve' (1968) is now only accessible through its archives (Bodor, 2015). Our main concern therefore was to work out what this archive contained and how we could exhibit and preserve its elements, forming them into a new performance artwork. Should relics from the performance be elevated as static art objects, and presented in vitrines or, could we reanimate them to reflect their original use as 'talking' boxes? Should we exhibit projectors used in the 1968 performance even if they are now broken or, project replica images using digital technology to focus on what was projected? Should we use archival documents – such as cue sheets and props lists – as information for remediation or, display them as documentary evidence of a past event? What does the exhibition of replicas alongside relics imply for the primacy that the 'auratic' object traditionally enjoys in museums? And finally how does the idea of remediation blur the concept of singular authorship in art?

The idea of conserving and displaying historical performance only through its material remains seemed to risk neutralising the intention and effect of these events as something to be experienced. We decided to approach the archive (documents, objects, memories, processes and events) as the artwork's current 'aesthetic form' to raise questions about the relationship between the archive and the artwork, history and mythology, performance and installation. The artist permitted us to use the 1968 cue sheets instead of the documentary film of the 1968 performance as our starting point for the remediation thus distinguishing the idea of the artwork from its materialisation at a certain moment of time. Focusing on the instructions instead of the documentary film helped us in analysing the ideas behind the work and negotiating between the different 'truths' of the score, the event, its memory and its documentation.

We worked with the artist to identify the elements he considers key to understanding and experiencing the artwork. These included projected imagery on layered surfaces and synchronised sound and light effects creating an environment that resembles ‘a forest of sound and shadows’ (Davies cited in Bodor 2015, 145). Following extensive archival research we also asked Davies to identify appropriate replica objects and imagery as well as his preference of the preservation and presentation of performance remains. Based on this knowledge we created a multimedia installation entitled ‘Adam on St Agnes’ Eve 1968/2015’ to distinguish from the 1968 performance and offer it as the present manifestation of the artwork that reinvents and preserves the work at once for the museum environment. The installation follows the instructions of the 1968 cue sheet as much as possible, which we also displayed alongside other archival material in the same gallery, as almost part of the installation.

Taking the exhibition as a form of conservation involved decisions about displaying relics within the installation environment. This included two cardboard boxes with collaged newspaper cuttings of ‘eyes’ and ‘lips’ that were used on numerous occasions during the 1960’s in different performances including ‘Adam on St Agnes’ Eve’. The fact that they survived as part of Davies’ archive has been through serendipity. They are now the ghost, the relic of an event of the past rather than existing as artworks in their own right. In 2013 they were found stored flat, dismantled and wrapped in polythene. On unwrapping a flutter of cut-out lips and eyes fell out like leaves. The boxes were also very dirty and dusty, the debris of time. The paper conservator’s discussions with the artist and the curator were about how far to go with cleaning and repairing them in preparation for display. One challenge was

to return the now two-dimensional archival objects into three-dimensional boxes. The box form is fragile, with crucial, structural flaps now missing. The white lining paper used to cover the brown cardboard is torn and detached in places. Comparing the boxes with photographs taken in the 1960's the cut-outs were faded, having suffered physical damage, become detached or were missing completely.

Davies was keen to completely clean and reinvigorate the boxes, but this would have been impossible not only because of the very short preparation time for the exhibition but because the aging was irreversible (slightly at odds with his idea of destruction becoming part of his art). A compromise was reached that included removing the loose surface dirt, re-attaching the lining paper and detaching cut-outs as well as ironing out the most visually distracting creases and folds. Stains and losses were not attempted to be removed or replaced. The final issue was to re-form the cardboard into 'talking' boxes suspended in the gallery as if 'worn' by a human figure and reanimated with hidden speakers as part of a synchronised sound and light environment of 14 minutes duration. This involved repairing the flaps invisibly (achieved by hiding repair papers and tapes within the corrugated structure) and toning the visible new repair papers with watercolour. On display the boxes look to the casual observer 'untouched' and 'aged' – not conserved. They remain dirty, stained, faded and torn, with strips of pressure sensitive tape springing out.

Conclusion

Unusually, the artist's intention in the case of this exhibition sometimes worked against his own methods as well as what we – curators and conservators - considered as the artwork's inherent logic. The act of consolidation (by the conservator)

potentially raises the question whether the artwork can now essentially be considered as involved with ideas of destruction and transformation to the same degree. 'Falling' became an example where the event of exhibiting influenced the artist's decision to fix artworks which were not intended to be stable at their conception. With 'Adam on St Agnes' Eve 1968/2015' the act of remediation (through collaboration) raises questions whether the current installation can be considered as the same artwork and if so how it survives into the future.

The common perception of paintings as more durable (being physical objects) than performances (event focussed) has been questioned during this exhibition process. Whereas Davies' paintings and objects brought up the question of whether and how to stabilise slowly disintegrating and decaying artworks for the duration of the exhibition, the conservation and exhibition of his performances through remediation allowed developing a new thinking about behaviour-based conservation in general. Despite curators and conservators embracing the paintings' changeable, transforming natures, the artist's revised intent to stabilise them overrode this understanding and redefined some previously self-destructive artworks as stable and collectable, as completed and finished objects.

While the preservation and presentation of his paintings have been in the end determined by the artist as the single author of the artwork to the point of him also repainting some of his works while installed for the show, the remediation process of performance as installation enforced collaboration. The exhibition as a form of preservation gave a context to 'Adam on St Agnes' Eve' to materialise again temporarily in a form that is co-determined by artist, curators, conservators and

technicians who collaborated in the decisions around its display. The important outcome of this collaboration was to keep the ‘essence’ or ‘spirit’ of the work, including sensations such as sounds and lights to strengthen it.

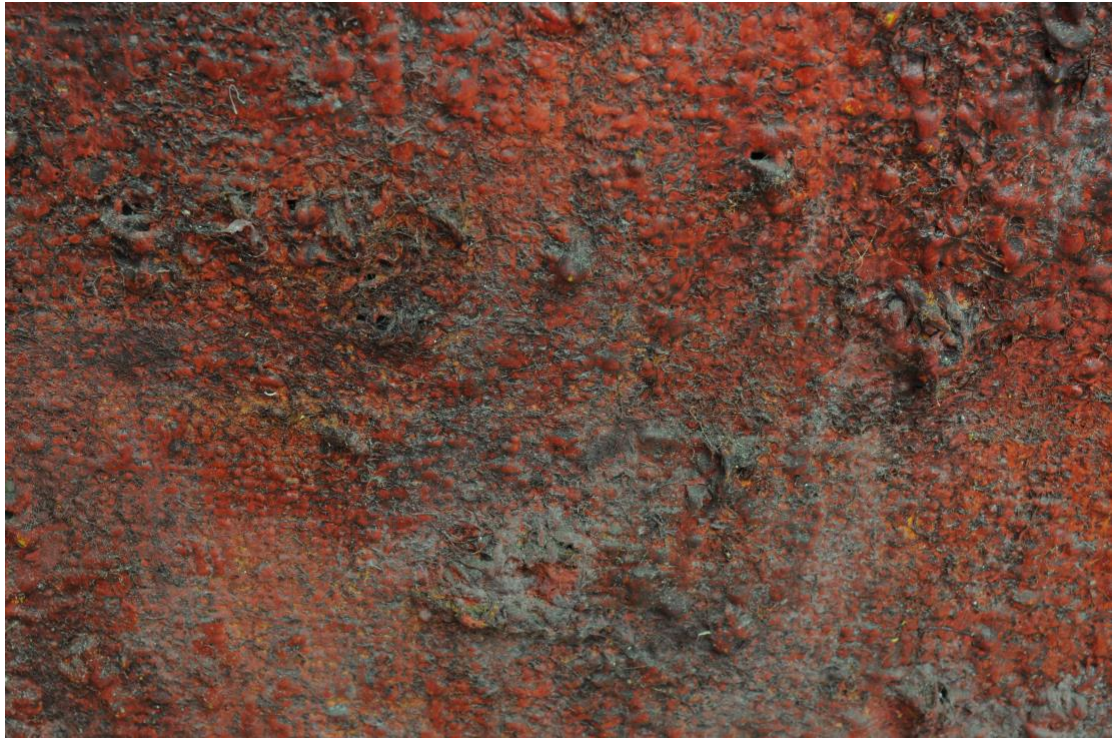
We consider the exhibition as a creative and temporary intervention in the artworks’ life through strategies of preservation and presentation that altered them from our first encounters and will consequently influence the audience’s encounters and their future understanding. Given that all the works will be returned to the artist, there is a stasis in their condition for the six-month duration of the exhibition. Their time on display becomes part of their history and when they return to the studio they return to oblivion, and the future of their survival – at least for ‘the now’ – remains in the artist’s hands.

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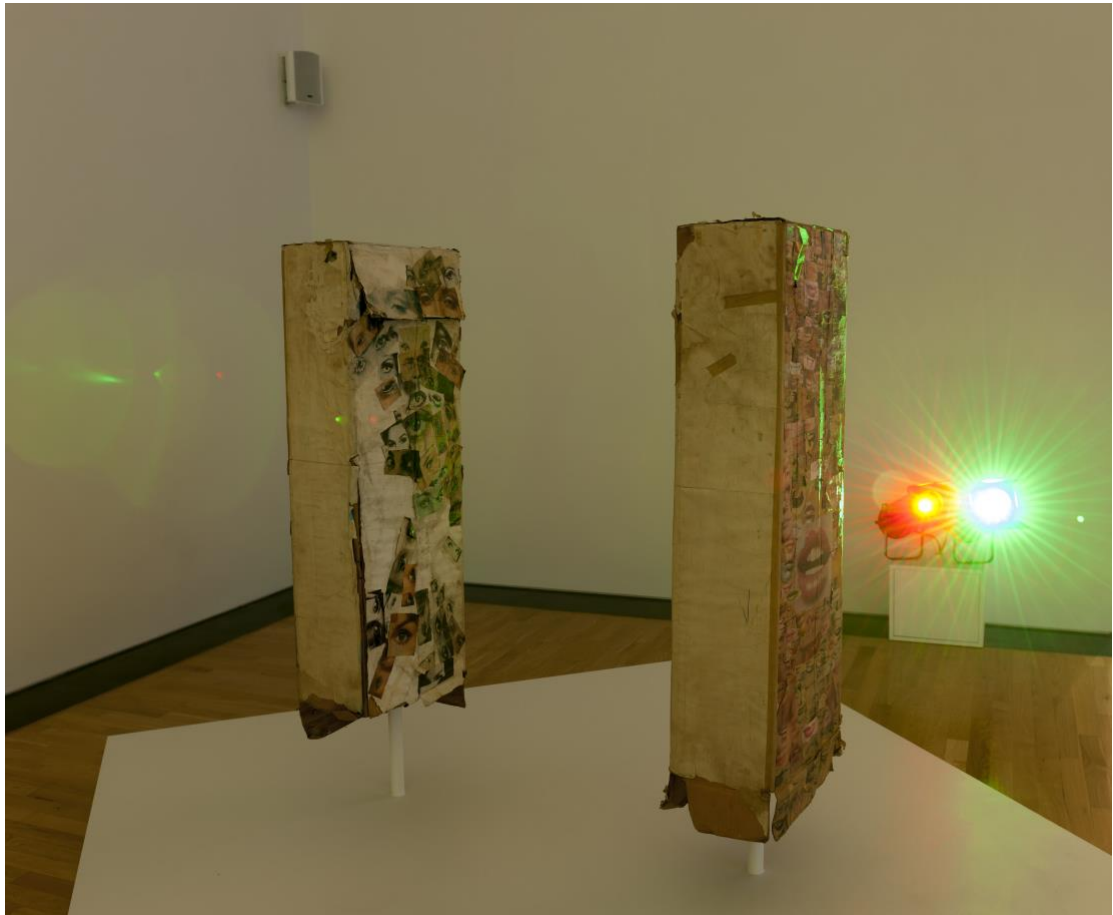
Detail of 'Red Feeling' (1959-61) showing dust and efflorescence on the surface.



Detail of the 'Lips' box during treatment.



Stands and speakers for 'Lips' and 'Eyes' boxes, during installation of 'Adam on St Agnes' Eve 1968/2015'



'Lips' and 'Eyes' boxes in 'Adam on St Agnes' Eve 1968/2015'



Installation view of 'Adam on St Agnes' Eve 1968/2015'